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ABSTRACT

By meeting with authors and discovering what inspires them, students can gain insights about the act of writing and also come to realize that even professional writers experience joys and frustrations when developing their craft. Authors provide natural contexts that help students to improve their reading and to enrich their vocabulary. Parents, teachers, and administrators interested in organizing a visiting author's program should; (1) form a committee representing parents, administrators, supervisors, librarians, higher-order literacy and, therefore, has an important place in the with the schools' philosophy, goals, and mission; (3) use a thematic structure when selecting books and authors; (4) prepare students for an author's visitation by having them read several of the author's books; (5) schedule the presentations at appropriate times; (6) secure funding for the visiting author's program; and (7) assess the worth of the program by reviewing outcomes as they relate to the school's mission. The committee, with the dynamic support of the building principal, must take a strong position against groups who want to control the program, indicating that some controversy stimulates higher-order literacy and therefore has an important place in the language arts curriculum. (A list of 10 reminders for an effective visiting authors' program is attached.) (RS)

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ED 370 129

# Supporting an Effective Visiting Authors' Program

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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We do many things to help our students improve their literacy learning. We immerse them in worthwhile activities, guide them to use effective strategies across the curriculum, and encourage them to develop independence with reading and writing. An often neglected, but important, part of this process is the direct role of authors. By meeting with authors and discovering what inspires them, our students gain insights about the act of writing and also come to realize that even professional writers experience joys and frustrations when developing their craft. This growing perspective helps sensitive teenagers to become increasingly aware that they are not alone in their range of emotions during writing. To support this thrust, parents, teachers, and administrators become key players as they cooperatively work toward bringing students and authors together.

## Why is a visiting authors' program important?

In the February 1992 issue of Phi Delta Kappan, Frank Smith reminds us that our culminating responsibility is to hand our students over to authors. According to Smith, authors provide natural contexts that help students to improve their reading and to enrich their vocabulary. Authors also reveal infinite patience when they give readers control and power to read as they want to read, thereby helping them develop and succeed with their own expectations. This growing independence makes them secure members of the "literacy club," since they are

engaging in powerful reading (and writing) behavior while they are identifying with peers who demonstrate similar behavior. Finally, authors provide a social context by enabling readers to keep company with them and with the characters they present in stories.

Smith's insightful thoughts about authors are geared to the vicarious experience of reading their books, but students also benefit from direct exposure to authors. Recently, James Lincoln Collier, a writer of historical fiction, talked with sixth graders at the Hauppauge (NY) Middle School. Initially, he discussed several of the books that he and his brother Christopher wrote and that the children already read. These included My Brother Sam Is Dead, Jump Ship to Freedom, War Comes to Willy Freeman, and Who Is Carrie? Then, he responded to the sixth graders' questions which focused on what motivates him to write. He said that he loves to personalize history by performing an act of imagination, "jumping out of this world and into the world of my characters. In a sense, I become the characters who lived during the period of time. I feel as they feel. I hear what they hear. I think as they think. I am there!" Collier also mentioned that he likes to communicate as if he is having a conversation: "If you can talk, you can write. Convert your talking to writing, and then revise, revise, revise." Listening to these thought-provoking comments firsthand was a special treat for the students since it helped them develop deeper insights about the act of writing and about themselves as writers.

## How can we organize a visiting authors' program?

An authors' program certainly has value, but how we organize it will determine its success or failure. The following suggestions reflect my experiences in helping parents, teachers, and administrators develop authors' programs. These suggestions are neither comprehensive nor prescriptive because local needs and wants determine specific approaches to carrying out this innovation.

- Form a committee representing parents, administrators, supervisors, librarians, teachers, and students. These individuals could be members of a larger Arts-in-Education committee, or they could be volunteers committed to bringing authors and students together. Administrators who encourage wide representation with a manageable number of people increase the chances of implementing and sustaining a credible authors' program.

- Develop a rationale that is well-matched with the school's philosophy, goals, and mission. An authors' program can be a viable part of the school's belief system, and a written rationale provides the needed foundation for success. Comments about authors motivating students to become lifetime readers and writers probably would be included in the rationale. Afterward, the committee should consider bringing the developing

rationale to a faculty meeting and encouraging additional suggestions from the staff.

- Use a thematic structure when selecting books and authors. Parents and students serving on the committee can be especially helpful in supporting this approach because their suggestions represent an intimate awareness of the student population's specific interests; thus, our students are more likely to connect their readings and related authors' presentations with important themes that have personal meaning for them. Even at-risk students possess a store of knowledge related to such polarized themes as good and evil, joy and sorrow, life and death, confrontation and compromise, loyalty and treachery, belonging and alienation, and courage and cowardice. In the May 1992 Journal of Reading, Lance Gentile and Merna McMillan consider these and other themes to have significance for at-risk students. When the themes are linked to meaningful literature and activities, these learners are more likely to benefit from reading and writing to learn. Furthermore, the positive implications for thematic learning are underscored when students have firsthand experiences with authors who talk about their books in the context of important ideas that the students previously read and discussed. Thus, students' interests and emotions are piqued as they bring their prior knowledge to the authors' presentations. This thrust certainly provides all students with opportunities (although not guarantees) for successful learning.

- Prepare students for an author's visitation by having them read several of the author's books. As teachers provide time in school to read and discuss the books, parents can support these literature-based activities at home. Newsletters and meetings of the PTSA are useful for reminding parents of the next author's visitation, the author's books that are being highlighted in school, and the importance of discussing these books at home. This type of preparation fulfills several purposes. First, readers will have a better understanding of and appreciation for the literary works and therefore will interact more effectively with the authors. Second, authors prefer to share ideas with an informed audience. In a recent discussion with Gordon Korman, a prolific writer of books for children and young adults, he indicated a strong preference to speak with audiences who are familiar with his works. "Otherwise, I feel like a standup comic!" Similarly, Ruth Minsky Sender, who has written such serious books as The Cage, prefers well-prepared audiences who ask thought-provoking questions. Although preparation is important, individuals who have not read the books should still be allowed to attend the presentations because they may become inspired to read the books afterward.

- Schedule the presentations at appropriate times. During the beginning and ending of the school year, teachers are respectively busy with orientation and closure-type activities. Likewise, the first and last weeks of progress (or marking)

periods are used for specific instructional and evaluative purposes. In addition, schools are closed for the winter and spring recess periods, for holidays, and for inclement weather. These realities, as well as the authors' busy lifestyles, lessen opportunities for scheduling visitations. An effective way of establishing appropriate times for the presentations is to survey the teachers and parents (through informal meetings or formal questionnaires) to determine their first, second, and third preferences. Then, the authors' program committee can contact prospective speakers and match their availability with the preferences. The final visitation schedule should be posted in the faculty lounge and published in a parental newsletter.

- Secure funding for the visiting authors' program. Money is needed for the writers and their books, and it may be acquired through the publisher, school budget, PTSA, local industry, or a combination of these and other resources. Some authors request an honorarium of only $100.00, while others demand several thousand dollars. The authors' program committee also should be aware of hidden costs for such items as videotaping the presentations and transporting the authors. Last year, one author even expected to be paid an additional fee if he spoke with teachers and parents informally during his lunch break. These matters should be clarified before a commitment is made.
- Assess the worth of the authors' program by reviewing outcomes as they relate to the school's mission and the program's

rationale. In one school where I serve as a consultant, the visiting authors' program is considered to be an important part of the school's language arts efforts. Each year, the principal and teachers assess the extent to which the program (1) helps students realize that authors are "real" people who often began writing as teenagers, (2) motivates learners to perceive themselves as writers, (3) encourages children to develop the lifetime reading habit, (4) instills pupils with a love of quality literature, and (5) guides students to incorporate authors' ideas across the curriculum. These outcomes are assessed by observing students' behavior and noting quantitative and qualitative factors. Specifically, the staff focuses on learners' performance before and after the authors' presentations and determines the degree of improvement in a variety of areas, including the number and diversity of books read for pleasure as well as the number and length of papers written and the variety of discourse generated (narrative, descriptive, expository, and poetic). Finally, the staff is profoundly concerned with the extent of growth observed in students' attitudes toward reading and writing, and attitudes are assessed through conferences with parents and their children, class discussions, and formal surveys. Not surprisingly, these considerations help the staff to decide if some of the authors' books should be added to the curriculum. For example, the Colliers' My Brother Sam Is Dead and Sender's The Cage were incorporated into the literature strand of the language arts curriculum.

## Should we be concerned about politics?

Regrettably, with all of our dedicated efforts to promote an effective visiting authors' program, we are unable to escape related politics. Our primary question should be, "Who is driving the curriculum?" or more specifically, "Who is making decisions about the authors' program and its relationship to the school's language arts efforts?" When the program is funded by the PTSA, local industry, or other external groups, these resources sometimes expect to control the agendas for the committee meetings, the selection of authors and their books, and the decision of whether or not the program should be voluntary or required for all teachers and students. Political control also can lead to censorship crises, especially when external groups attempt to negate the use of potentially controversial topics, authors, and books dealing with such topics as alcohol, drugs, ethnic/racial diversity, politics, religion, sex, strong language, and violence. The authors' committee, with dynamic support from the building principal, must take a strong position indicating that some controversy stimulates higher-order literacy and therefore has an important place in the language arts curriculum. In addition, external groups must be reminded that overall decision-making concerning the visiting authors' program involves a variety of perspectives, but educators ultimately drive the process and the outcomes.

## Is an authors' program worth the effort?

Within the space limitations of this column, I have not addressed a number of areas, such as determining the effectiveness of prospective speakers before they are selected. For example, committee members could observe the authors making presentations elsewhere or could contact colleagues who have observed the authors firsthand. Certainly, these and similar concerns deserve consideration.

In this month's column, I have highlighted cooperation among parents, teachers, and administrators as they become involved with forming an authors' committee, developing a rationale for the visiting authors' program, using a thematic structure, preparing students for the authors' presentations, developing the most appropriate schedule for the presentations, securing funding for the writers and their books, and assessing the value of the program. In addition to these concerns, I discussed political realities that could negate or lessen the impact of an effective program. The primary role of the authors' committee is to focus on these and other strategies as they support the school's needs and wants. The committee also should keep the professional staff and parents abreast of every phase of carrying out this important innovation. Finally, if we truly believe in the efficacy of handing our students over to authors, then we and our students are more likely to benefit from the poignant and substantive outcomes of our efforts.

Some reminders for an effective visiting authors' program

1. Form a committee of individuals who are committed to bringing authors and readers together.

2. Involve the faculty in developing an authors' program rationale that is linked to the school's mission.

3. Select books and authors based on thematic structure.

4. Have students read several of the authors' books as preparation for the authors' presentations.

5. Survey the teachers and parents to determine their preferences for scheduling the visitations, and avoid times that conflict with important instructional and evaluative activities, recess periods, holidays, and authors' busy schedules.

6. Secure financial support for the authors' program through available resources.

7. Assess the program's outcomes, and consider both quantitative and qualitative factors.

8. Respond to related politics by encouraging different

perspectives but ultimately by permitting educators to drive the decision-making process.

9. Inform the professional staff and parents of every phase of carrying out the innovation.

10. Enjoy the entire process.

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